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AUTHOR Alfred, Richard L.
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ABSTRACT

A large number of students enrolling in community colleges do not aspire to or complete the associate degree. Instead, they attend community colleges for a multitude of reasons, including job training or retraining, licensure, preparation for transfer, and avocational pursuits. Given the preponderant pattern of part-time attendance and diversity of student objectives, it stands to reason that questions would arise as to the relevance of the associate degree as a student outcomes measure. These questions differ depending upon the perspective from which student outcomes are viewed. For community college administrators, a college is "effective" when student outcomes are produced at a level sufficient to balance the costs of instruction. For educational policy makers, college effectiveness may be measured in terms of nondegree outcomes related to economic development and public service programs. Teaching faculty may have still yet another perspective on outcomes, arguing that the college is effective when it implements academic policies that restrict the distribution of rewards to students who successfully meet standards. Within the broader context of social and educational change, additional questions arise about the utility of the associate degree as an outcomes measure; e.g., In a labor market marked by increased emphasis on service and technological jobs, is the degree undereducation for some jobs and overeducation for others? Do constraints on faculty technological skill and knowledge undermine the perceived value of an associate degree? As societal conditions change, the associate degree may diminish in importance, and non-degree, short-term courses developed for specific constituencies on an "as need" basis may represent a better strategy for achieving socially desirable student outcomes. (RO)

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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Richard L. Alfred
Associate Professor
Program Chair, Higher and Adult Continuing Education
University of Michigan

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES

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Should the associate degree be the primary student outcome measure? What are the current perspectives held by campus and off-campus groups about the associate degree? How do these perspectives influence institutional "positioning" strategies pursued in relationship to funding sources? What alternative strategies can be used for assessment of student outcomes given changing social conditions and public policies? How central is the associate degree as a student outcome measure in a period of rapid change in public expectations for the mission, program/service mix, and funding patterns of community colleges? This ERIC Digest draws upon perspectives in the literature to answer these and other questions asked about the associate degree by policy makers and college practitioners.

Relevance of the Associate Degree as an Outcome Measure

A large number of students enrolling in community colleges do not aspire to or complete the associate degree. Although the number of associate degrees awarded rose rapidly in the 1970's, extrapolation of the number of degrees awarded in relationship to the average number of students entering community colleges between 1974 and 1978 would yield an approximate ratio of one degree for every three newly enrolled students (National Center for Education Statistics, 1981). Students attend community colleges for a multitude of reasons besides associate degree attainment, including job training or retraining, licensure, preparation for transfer, and avocational pursuits. When we consider that 65 percent of students attending community colleges in Fall 1984 were enrolled part-time, that the modal credit load for community college students in states such as California was three credits in 1984, and the individual college studies show that as many as one out of two entering students have no intention of completing the associate degree, it stands to reason that questions would arise as to the relevance of the associate degree as a student outcomes measure (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1985;

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, 1985; Sheldon, 1982; McConochie, 1983; and Smith, 1983).

Divergent Perspectives Among Constituencies

Fundamental to the concept of community college effectiveness is the notion that institutional outcomes must attract the attention of one or more receiving organizations if they are to serve as a guide for resource allocation. To the extent that the associate degree is viewed by external organizations (each maintaining particular values and norms) as a benchmark for institutional productivity, it will become a criterion against which effectiveness is evaluated. The associate degree is but one outcome, however, attributed to student enrollment in community colleges. Depending on the perspective in which student outcomes are viewed, an "outcome" can be as narrow as the number of students withdrawing from a particular course in a given semester or as broad as the total range of outcomes experienced by students in work and further education. Viewer perspective, then, is extremely important when considering the utility of the associate degree as an outcome measure.

From the perspective of community college administrators, information related to a broad range of student outcomes in work and further education (e.g., salary, employer perceptions of performance, enrollment in baccalaureate institutions, etc.) is necessary for determination of resource levels in the budgetary process. The college is "effective" when student outcomes are produced at a level sufficient to balance the costs of instruction. For the associate degree, the implication is one of centrality or peripherality in the determination of cost-benefits depending on the productivity expectations of funding sources.

Educational policy makers external to the college (e.g., state coordinating boards, legislators, and state budget officials) may hold a different perspective on the relationship of student outcomes and effectiveness. Adhering to a principle of "externality," community colleges are effective when they produce benefits that satisfy not only the individual consumer, but also groups and organizations in an identified service region. Thus, nondegree outcomes produced by the college through economic development and public service programs may assume primacy.

Still another perspective on effectiveness may be held by teaching faculty. The college is effective when it implements academic policies that restrict the distribution of rewards (grades, credits, and degrees) to students who successfully meet standards irrespective of cost.

Perspectives on the primacy of the associate degree as a student outcomes measure, in short, will vary with the characteristics of the institution under study, the values and norms of the constituencies engaged in assessment, and the rationale underlying student outcomes assessment. Divergent perspectives have important implications for institutional positioning with revenue sources and student markets. On the one hand, if a premium is placed on degree-seeking students in established programs, then the associate degree will be primary student outcomes measure. On the other hand, if campus decision makers emphasize an adaptive institutional role that is characteristic of public service organizations, then economic development and community education will come to the fore as measures of student outcomes. Finally, efforts to portray

the institution as a symbiotic organization focusing on powerful linkages with public- and private-sector organizations will result in still another image of the associate degree. In this conception, the community college will function as a broker for essential services required by complex organizations, the associate degree will be valued only in terms of its capacity to further the exchange of resources between the college and its constituent organizations.

Impact of Changing Societal Conditions on Student Outcomes

We can view student outcomes as a three-dimensional construct comprised of: 1) antecedent conditions such as economic conditions, social attitudes, changing technology, and other factors that influence student decisions related to college attendance and major field selection; 2) educational process conditions such as performance in courses, instructional strategies employed by faculty, and other factors that combine with antecedent conditions to shape student decisions relative to degree completion and post-college plans; and 3) outcomes achieved by students in work and further education. If one accepts the premise that perspectives held about the associate degree as a student outcomes measure vary in accord with the values and outlooks of different constitutencies, questions need to be posed about the effect of changing societal conditions and educational process conditions on student outcomes assessment. How do changing societal conditions impact student outcomes assessment in community colleges? What is the relationship between societal conditions and educational process characteristics in the outcomes assessment process? Do selected indicators change in salience as measures of student outcomes given specific patterns of change in societal conditions and educational process conditions? What is the status of the associate degree as a student outcomes measure in a period of social change when educational process conditions must change to meet student needs?

Alfred (1985) presents a comprehensive analysis of the impact of changing societal conditions, such as the transition to a global economy, tightening state control, change in government spending priorities, and transition in the structure of the family. In light of these conditions, one must question the utility of the associate degree as a student outcomes measure. Is it possible that the degree may suffer a decline in utility among student and resource markets as changing societal conditions alter constituency needs? To illustrate, in a labor market marked by increased emphasis on service and technological jobs, students may perceive the degree as under-education for some jobs and over-education for others. Its utility as a credential guaranteeing access and mobility in the labor market is certain to be questioned. Likewise, consider the value of the associate degree in a period of technological advance constrained by faculty knowledge and skill obsolescence. Will the associate degree be viewed as a desirable outcome of enrollment in community colleges if instructional quality is perceived as substandard? Change in societal conditions will lead to change in patterns of student demand unless educational process conditions are altered in community colleges to provide a comparative advantage for associate degree programs in the production of student outcomes.

Policy Implications for the Associate Degree

During the remainder of the 1980's, faculty and administrators will find that student outcomes assessment strategies will become increasingly complex as

the result of divergent value systems applied to student outcomes information by external groups and organizations. Community colleges will become the fulcrum of increased public pressure to reduce educational costs and to expand access through adoption of a public service mission. Emerging societal conditions such as the changing structure of the labor market, advancing technology, domestic policy emphasis on government spending, and centralization of decision making within state agencies both encourage and support this mission.

This profile suggests that the associate degree may diminish in importance as a student outcomes measure. As increased emphasis is placed on "public-service programming," community college faculty and administrators will need to develop an acute understanding of the relationship between changing societal conditions, constituency expectations and values, and educational programming to produce student outcomes in accord with stated needs. Producing student outcomes that directly respond to changing constituency expectations will become a requisite for institutional effectiveness. Providing non-degree, short-term courses to specific constituencies on an "as need" basis to ensure occupational and financial security in a period of social change -- in contrast to maximizing opportunities for attainment of the associate degree -- may be the best strategy to achieve this goal.

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